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# Bennett High Alumni Association

2885 Main St.  
Buffalo, NY 14214

September 2, 2017

Catherine Collins  
New York State Board of Regents  
508 Main Street  
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dear Regent Collins:

It is with great joy and gratification that we celebrate the official opening of the Lewis J. Bennett High School of Innovative Technology this week. Incredibly, it is also an anchor Community School in our neighborhood. It is a dream come true.

Who knew when we sat with you and talked about losing the Bennett campus to a charter school that this day would come. We know that your intervention both at the city and state levels was critical in making this happen.

You can count on us to remain committed to the students at the new Bennett. We will be their biggest supporters and advocates.

Enclosed is a document that we prepared chronicling the steps we took from charter threat to this week's opening.

We are so grateful that you listened, you cared and you acted.

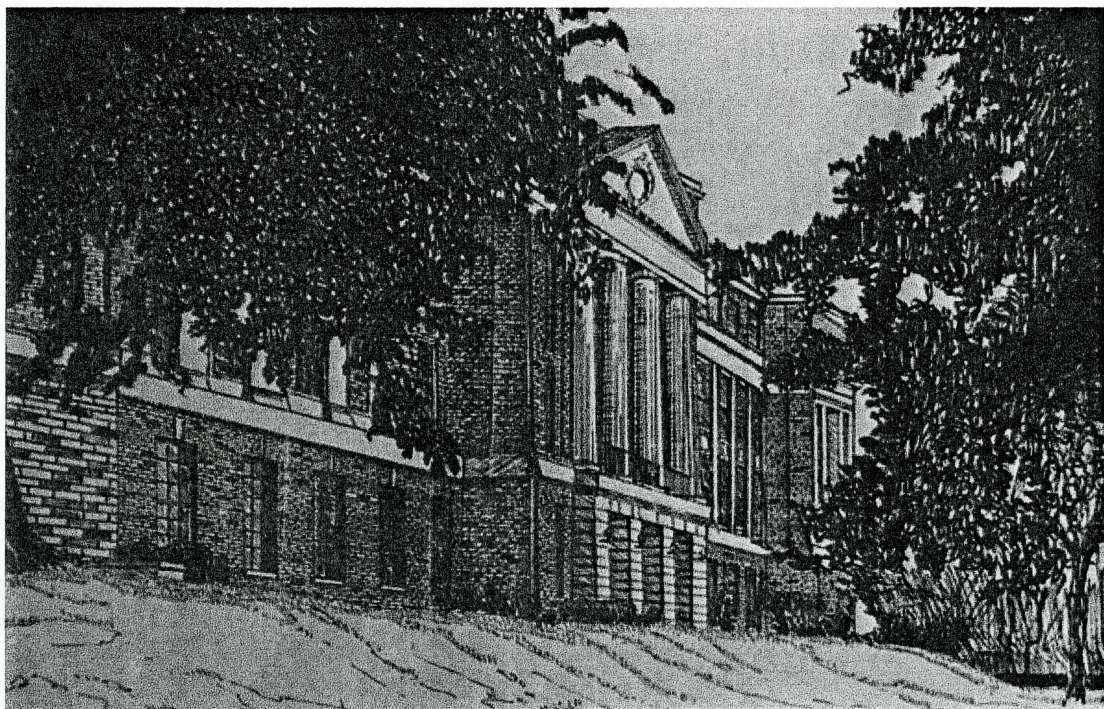
Sincerely,

Marilyn Wittman  
for the Bennett Redesign Team

Enc.

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Bennett High School  
Alumni Association

# ***SAVE OUR SCHOOL***

Timeline 2014 – 2017



# ***Bennett High School***

## ***"Save Our School" Redesign Team Timeline***

***Mission: to respond to the State's phase out of Bennett High School by replacing it with a new Bennett rather than having it become a Charter School as proposed by the then majority members of the Board of Education.***

*Background: The State Education Department slated Bennett for phase out and closure based on poor performance and lack of academic progress. One class would be eliminated each year until the last graduation in June 2017.*

### ***Summer 2014***

- *Connie Moss, an outside educational consultant, responded to Board of Education's Request for a Proposal for a plan for a new Bennett. Stipend for her: \$40,000.*
- *Members of the Bennett Alumni association were active participants at the Connie Moss meetings to write the plan.*
- *The Moss Plan was tabled by Board and never considered again.*

### ***September 2014***

- *Irene Greene, President of the Bennett Alumni Association, invites Donald Ogilvie, Superintendent, to meet with the Alumni Board to outline our options to "Save Our School."*
- *Superintendent Ogilvie offers two scenarios:*
  - *Easy: Support the Charter School initiative and use Alumni's leverage to try to retain the name of the school.*
  - *Hard: develop a plan for a new Bennett, which would remain a Buffalo Public School.*
- *Alumni Board decides to form a committee to work on a new school plan, one step at a time, to see where it leads. The Alumni Board concludes that it wants to continue the legacy and remain a Buffalo Public School.*



#### October 2014

- *The Buffalo School District published a Request for a Proposal for a new Bennett. It required that a comprehensive plan be written including all the specifics outlined in the RFP. Deadline: December 12, 2014.*
- *The Bennett Redesign Team began writing the plan. This was an ongoing process with countless meetings in the Alumni Room at Bennett. Individuals wrote parts of the plan and the group met to review and edit what was written. There wasn't much time and the team felt the pressure of the deadline.*
- *Meanwhile informational pickets supporting our cause were organized with lines forming in front of the school.*

#### November 2014

- *Margaret Puzio, Redesign Team representative, was interviewed favorably by the Buffalo News regarding the plan.*
- *Ella Dunne, a District Lead Transitional Facilitator, was assigned to be of assistance. She joined our team.*
- *Many more meetings were held to write and edit.*
- *"Snovember" hits. The Buffalo metro area is at a standstill. Margaret Puzio and Marilyn Wittman continue to write while snowed in and collaborate in real time. Progress is made; the deadline looms.*

#### December 2014

- *The District process required that a public meeting be held where the proposal is offered to interested parties for comment. This meeting was held at Bennett on December 2, 2014. Several hundred alumni, parents, students, staff and community came to the Redesign Team presentation. The plan was well received as comprehensive and organized.*
- *The 164 page Bennett Redesign Team Plan was submitted to the District ahead of the deadline.*

#### January 2015

- *The District created a team of administrators to read and evaluate the plan.*
- *Linda Cimus, Assistant Superintendent, requested a meeting to review the plan prior to the Board Meeting. Marilyn Wittman met with her and responded to her questions successfully.*
- *The District required that a presentation of the plan be made to the members of the Board of Education. This was done on January 12. An overview was made by Margaret Puzio and Marilyn Wittman and the whole team responded to questions raised by the Board.*

- On January 22, the second required community meeting was held. Again the plan was well received.
- Beginning at this time and through the first part of 2015, students, staff and alumni regularly attended Board of Education meetings where they spoke during the public comment time. Busses left Bennett and transported the students to these meetings.

#### *February 2015*

- The threat of the charter takeover continued. Increasingly, the fate of the new plan and the school were in jeopardy by the Board majority, which supported giving Bennett away. Individual Board majority members visited Bennett with representatives from Charter Schools. During these visits, Charter School personnel began measuring rooms in anticipation of modifications to the building that they would make.
- On February 4, the Redesign Team met with Superintendent Ogilvie. This was an exchange of information meeting, where the team learned that there was a possibility of using an SED SES Grant for a different version of a new school at Bennett, which would retain the building as a Buffalo Public School. "Save Our School" became "Save Our Building" in an alternate plan to prevent the charter takeover.
- On February 12, yet another meeting took place with Superintendent Ogilvie. This was in anticipation of the Board meeting the next day where a critical vote on the future of the school was to take place. A strategy was planned but there was recognition that chances were slim for prevailing. The Board Majority held a 5 to 4 edge in every vote.
- On February 13, the critical Board Meeting was held. In the morning, the majority successfully voted to turn Bennett into a Charter School. Then Theresa Harris-Tiggs, minority member of the Board, challenged. She said that the correct procedural rules were not followed. She was joined in a filibuster by Sharon Belton-Cottman and Barbara Nevergold. Hours of discussion passed. Superintendent Ogilvie began to add amendments to the original morning Board motion. By the time it was well into the afternoon, the resolution that was ultimately passed retained Bennett as a Buffalo Public School. The resolution called for the SES grant to be used at the site while moving Middle Early College there. Bennett phase out students would remain and co-locate with Middle Early College. The building would remain a Buffalo Public School and everyone wishing to save Bennett was delighted. While the resolution didn't create a new Bennett, it kept a spark of hope alive. The work of the Alumni Redesign Team continued.



#### *October and November 2015*

- *This was a very frustrating time for the team. The "regular" meetings were often cancelled and or they were unproductive. We were given tasks to do that were irrelevant. We were unable to get clear responses to our inquiries.*
- *In desperation, we turned to our Board Member, Sharon Belton-Cottman, who could not have been more responsive, encouraging and helpful. She got us the answers we needed and gave us the impetus not to give up.*

#### *December 2015*

- *It was during this month that Superintendent Cash re-organized his Cabinet. James Weimer and Sabastino Cimato, Associate Superintendents for School Leadership, were assigned to work with the Redesign Team to establish the new Bennett. This was a most positive turning point.*
- *The vision was to open in September 2016 with a ninth grade Computer Academy. The Computer Academy would be attached to the Middle Early College BEDS code for the 2016-2017 school year. Sue Doyle, Middle Early College principal, would head both schools.*
- *During 2016-2017, the application for a State Education Department BEDS Code would be submitted so that Bennett could become a "stand alone" school beginning in September 2017.*
- *It was also during this time period that Crystal Peoples-Stokes was able to get her Community Schools legislation passed. The philosophy and money that came from this law would advance the new Bennett vision considerably toward the Redesign Team's original plan.*

#### *January, February and March 2016*

- *The meetings between the Associate Superintendents and the Redesign Team continued.*
- *An urgent goal was to recruit students for the Computer Academy for September. This initiative was complicated by the fact that 8<sup>th</sup> graders had been well into the high school decision- making and application process. The District registration process had to be modified to allow for additional rounds of applications.*
- *Open Houses were held at Bennett to showcase the Computer Academy. It was with joy that we recruited our first student, Nicole Baker.*
- *Progress on recruitment was advanced when retired Buffalo principal and member of the Redesign Team, John Vella, was hired by the District to lead the recruitment initiative.*

#### *April 2016*

- *Recruitment Road Shows traveled to multiple area schools to promote the Computer Program.*
- *Student applications were received and reviewed for admission.*
- *Seats for the 2016-2017 school year in the Computer Academy were filled.*

#### *May 2016*

- *The Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for new Bennett took place. In attendance were the Mayor, the Superintendent, community leaders, District leaders, alumni, parents, students and guests. It was a glorious day and a huge milestone toward fulfilling the mission of the Bennett Alumni Association.*

#### *June, July and August 2016*

- *The Redesign Team was the topic of a front-page Buffalo News article about the Bennett Alumni Association's effort to the "Save Our School." The article was comprehensive and positive.*
- *Staff for the Computer Academy was chosen by Principal Sue Doyle.*
- *The Redesign Team continued to meet with District and Middle Early college administrators.*
- *The Redesign Team worked with the District in the preparation of the BEDS Code application to the State Education Department. This work was hands-on with multiple meetings for the purpose of writing the document.*
- *An Ice Cream Social, sponsored by the Alumni Association, was held for the students of both schools, the Computer Academy and Middle Early College, during their August orientation.*

#### *September 2016*

- *The Computer Academy, the new Bennett, welcomed its first ninth grade class.*
- *Work continued on the BEDS Code application after it was discovered that the District had the Redesign Team work on the wrong form.*
- *A Community School was established at the Bennett site. Work began to offer parent, community and student evening and Saturday programs.*
- *Redesign team representatives continued to meet with District Associate Superintendents.*

#### *October 2016*

- *The BEDS Code application required the name of the new school, which could not be the same as the old school. Legacy was important to the Alumni Association; a new start was important to the District. After months of brainstorming and an inspired idea by team member, Neil Lange, it was decided to name the school*



*Lewis J. Bennett High School of Innovative Technology. The Superintendent approved.*

- *Before the BEDS Code application could be submitted, there had to be a public meeting to present the new name of the school to interested parties. The meeting was held and the name was embraced by everyone present. The application reverted back to the District for completion and the Superintendent's approval.*

#### *November and December 2016*

- *Recruitment for school year 2017-2018 was well under way. Central registration was accepting applications from 8<sup>th</sup> graders throughout the city.*
- *Central registration reported that hundreds of applications were received for seats in the new Bennett for September 2017. The Redesign Team was gratified by the demand and was happy to report the numbers to the Alumni Association.*

#### *January and February 2017*

- *The meetings with the District Associate Superintendents continued. There were discussions about curriculum, business partnerships, staffing and principal selection.*
- *Delaware North had become a full partner with the Computer Academy and our ninth graders were given opportunities to visit the new corporate headquarters.*
- *The students formed Mastermind and Chess Clubs as extra curricular activities.*
- *The Bennett Alumni Association funded the requests of Computer Academy teachers to give students opportunities for events beyond the Board of Education budget.*
- *Computer Academy teachers attended staff development programs to learn how to further integrate the use of the students' personal laptops into their classrooms.*

#### *March 2017*

- *The BEDS Code application was approved by the Board and submitted to the State Education Department. An expected response was anticipated by July 1.*

#### *April and May 2017*

- *Students received acceptance letters for the Lewis J. Bennett High School of Innovative Technology.*
- *As there still was no administrator appointed, Sue Doyle, Middle Early College principal, headed the teacher transfer/staffing process. She interviewed prospective candidates for positions at Lewis J. Bennett.*

*June 2017*

- *The Redesign Team meets and creates a timeline of its work to create a new Bennett.*
- *The last Bennett High School class graduates*
- *The BEDS code approval for Lewis J. Bennett High School of Innovative Technology is received.*

*July 2017*

- *The ongoing mission of the Bennett Alumni Association and the Bennett Redesign Team is to build a positive and supportive relationship with the administration, staff and students of Lewis J. Bennett High School and to be an advocate in every way possible for their needs.*

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*Acknowledgements:*

*The permanent members of the Bennett Alumni Redesign Team were:*

*Carol Caserta*

*Ryan Montgomery*

*Nick Costantino*

*Margaret Puzio*

*Marsha Jadd*

*Marilyn Wittman*

*Neil Lange*

*The Redesign Team worked at the request of the Bennett Alumni Association Board of Directors and Irene Greene, President.*

*Every day and in every way, the Redesign Team enjoyed the endless help, support and encouragement of our Board of Education Member, Sharon Belton-Cottman.*

*Throughout the effort, however, there were hundreds of alumni, community, parents and students who supported the goal of the Alumni Association to have Bennett remain a Buffalo Public School serving as an anchor to the community and its residents past and present.*

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